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Keeping a venerable Osaka sushi shop, founded in 1841, flourishing as a going concern

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My father and I had differences of opinion about my going to university

When the time came to sit my university entrance exams, I was thinking in terms of either Kobe University or Hitotsubashi University. I knew Mathematics III was one of the subjects on the Hitotsubashi exams, so I enrolled in science-related classes at high school. Then, when I looked into it a bit further, I read in the Hitotsubashi brochure that many graduates were pursuing careers as diplomats, certified public accountants, and the like. Since I had some interest in accounting, I thought, “This seems like the perfect university for me!”

My family's business is a sushi shop that was founded in the twelfth year of the Tenpo Era (1841). My father never said a word to me about it, but as the only son in the family (I have three sisters), I felt there was sort of an unspoken assumption that I would eventually have to take over the business. But for the time being, I had a strong desire to go to university and become qualified as an accountant.

My father's hopes for me were somewhat different – he simply wanted me to become a productive member of society without too much fuss. He was pretty old-school, and I think he was afraid that going to university and dabbling in too much book-learning would give me a big head and throw me off balance in the real world. On the surface, however, he did not oppose the idea of my going to university.

I also knew that English listening comprehension would be part of the Hitotsubashi exam, so I put a fair amount of effort into studying English. I am sure I had a strong Osaka accent, but I continued studying English after I entered university. Sadly, however, I never got to the point where I was really satisfied with my speaking ability. This was one of the reasons I sent my eldest son to study abroad in the United States. One thing I'd like to ask our universities to do is to provide students with the kind of education that would make them fluent in English by the time they graduate.

Aiming to become a CPA, I studied hard in Professor Iino's seminar

Since I wanted to become an accountant, I enrolled in Professor Toshio Iino's seminar. Perhaps because he did not have so many students in his seminar, he sort of took a shine to me. Even after I took over the family business, he would always make a point of dropping in any time he visited Osaka. When I told him that my eldest son had become a CPA, he was as happy as if it had been his own son. I never did become an accountant, but my son has fulfilled that dream for me.

As far as my studies were concerned, I'd always enjoyed math, and even today I can remember the formula for computing the time for replacing fluorescent bulbs. At department stores and other large enterprises, it's not very efficient to replace fluorescent fixtures one at a time as they burn out, so we compute mathematically when would be the most efficient time to replace them all at the same time.

My club activities were with the mountaineering club. In my sophomore year, someone lost their footing on Mt Hodaka and ended up dangling from a rope over a very long drop. Thankfully, he was rescued, but when my father heard of this, it worried him and he asked me to quit the club. Since my father had been kind enough to send me to university without opposition, I sympathized with his feelings and ended up quitting the mountaineering club during my second year.

After three and a half years as a banker, I returned to the family business

After graduating, I went to work at a bank. Not only my immediate family, but all my relatives as well were shopkeepers, so I was curious to see what life in the corporate world was like. I was particularly impressed by the young bank branch managers, who, despite their youth, were dealing with all the shop owners. So I start-



ed my life as an Osaka banker - but of course the daily routine for new bank employees was nowhere near as glamorous as I'd imagined.

After I'd been at the bank for about three and a half years, my father asked me if I would help mind the store. I struggled with the decision, but eventually acceded to my father's wishes and returned home. That was nearly forty years ago.

It was only three and a half years, but I think it was good that I'd had a chance to see what working outside the family business was like. If I'd simply been told to take over the shop without that experience, I might have harbored a lot of rose-colored illusions about what it was like working in the corporate world.

At university I'd learned about how to run a business – particularly that it has to be a “going concern”, a sustainable enterprise. And my experience as a banker taught me something of the business world. So what I had to do now was apply these experiences to developing the potential of a famous sushi shop established in Osaka in 1841. When I looked at how hard my father was working to keep the business going, I knew I had to roll up my sleeves and pitch in.



A shop in the heart of Semba, sharing its history

Yoshino Sushi is right in the center of the Semba district in Osaka. If you look into the history of Semba, it was at the height of its prosperity in the Genroku Period (1688-1704). The Yodoya Bridge had just been completed, the nearby Nakanoshima and Dojima districts were

lined with mansions of the various feudal domains, and it was said that 70 percent of the nation's wealth was concentrated in Osaka - and 70 percent of that in Semba.

Yodoya Tatsugoro, the man who built Yodoya Bridge, had grown wealthy building the embankments on the Yodo River, and his business also became the most powerful financial conglomerate in Osaka with its successful development of Nakanoshima. It was said, “Throughout the thirty-three provinces of western Japan, there is not a *daimyo* [feudal lord] who does not owe money to Yodoya.” He was rumored to have more than 100 million *kanme* (about 375 million kg) of silver out in loans to various *daimyo*, as well as reserves of 120,000 *ryo* (about 4,500 kg) of gold and 85,000 *ryo* (about 3,187 kg) of silver. But in 1705 this vast fortune was confiscated from Yodoya by the shogunate.

The lesson derived from this by the merchants of Osaka was first and foremost, to know their place. They turned to seeking stability rather than expansion, and specialization rather than diversification. The Kyoho Era (1716-1736) ushered in an era of slow economic growth that furthered this defensive stance in terms of business management.

There's a common expression *Osaka no kuidaore* (“in Osaka they eat till they drop”), but if you look into the etymology of it, it actually means something quite different from what people commonly think. The expression dates back to the time of Yodoya Tatsugoro. The warlord Hideyoshi built a canal to link the Yodo River to other waterways to facilitate the movement of goods by boat. Bridges were also needed to span the river, and Hideyoshi forced the merchants to foot the bill. With each bridge that was constructed, at least one merchant would go bankrupt. As this economic pressure continued, it came to be said that the sinking of even one more piling (*kui*) for another bridge would cause another merchant to go bankrupt (*daore*). So this was the real history behind this expression. As the sixth-generation owner of a sushi shop, I certainly prefer the present interpretation, however!



Carefully maintaining traditional flavor while expanding our distribution network

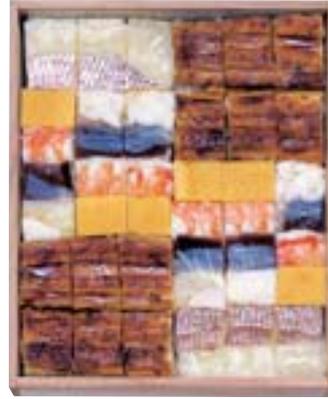
At the beginning of the Meiji Era (1868-1912), large shops lined the streets of Semba, and prosperous merchants and their wives made their homes there. In other words, it became a district for wealthy gourmets.

Up until that time, sushi in Osaka was oshizushi, or

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“pressed” sushi, using the cheapest fish available. Rather than being considered a delicacy, it was a common snack. But the third-generation head of our family, Torazo, decided the time had come to make better use of the Semba location, and began to make a fancier version of the old Osaka sushi, using the best ingredients – shrimp, red snapper, grilled sea eel, omelet, etc. – and selling it as boxed sushi (*hako-zushi*). This was a great hit. It was said that the lowly apprentices and clerks saw the shop owners and managers and their wives eating Yoshino Sushi, and dreamed of the day when they could do the same. Being able to afford *hako-zushi* was a sign you had made it in the world, and the apprentices set about their work with this as a concrete goal to strive towards. Being young, of course, they were also probably just hungry for it...

After the Second World War, many of the more affluent residents of Semba moved to places like Nishinomiya and Ashiya, so Semba became almost exclusively commercial rather than residential. This was not good for a sushi shop as we lost some of our best customers. Something had to be done to expand our distribution, so my father, the fifth-generation head of the family, found outlets for us in big department stores such as Hanshin and Takashimaya, and as sixth-generation head of our business I have followed that example and established outlets in hotels such as the Royal Hotel. I’ve also taken



“Crammed in like sushi” : A serving for three sits snugly in its wooden box. Topped with fish omelet, shrimp, red snapper, grilled sea eel, the pressed sushi rice also has a middle layer of *shiitake* mushrooms and grilled *nori* seaweed.

Sushi gift certificates issued by Yoshino Sushi in the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-26) Periods: evidence of how popular the shop’s sushi was as a gift item.



The wooden form used to make *hako-zushi*. The interior is about three inches square and an inch and a half deep. *Hako-zushi* is a kind of microcosm of traditional Japanese cooking techniques, involving vinegar pickling, steaming, grilling, and simmering, and this is the source of Yoshino Sushi’s slogan for its *hako-zushi*: “Three square inches of Japanese cuisine.”



us into steamed sushi (*mushizushi*), which responds well to being frozen and can be shipped anywhere in the country.

Osaka's unique food culture unfolds in a three-inch square universe

Yoshino Sushi uses a different Chinese character to write the word sushi than those in common usage today - namely, one that according to Chinese historical sources means fish fermented with rice, or what is now

called *narezushi*. This was the original form of sushi, and Yoshino Sushi uses this character in its formal name to honor that legacy. By the way, the artwork depicting our name on display at the shop was done by the great Meiji calligrapher Hidai Tenrai.

The original form of Osaka sushi is made by pressing the rice and other ingredients with both hands, rather than with weights, in a wooden form or mold that is just about three inches square. The original intention of preserving food still remains and it can be enjoyed for some time after it is made. A

particularly firm variety of rice, *Nihon-bare*, which has a deliciously chewy consistency, is used for sushi.

While there are many different varieties of sushi in Osaka - *makizushi* (rolls), *taizushi* (sea bream sushi), *sabazushi* (mackerel sushi), Kansai *chirashi* (Kansai-style with ingredients "scattered" over a bowl of rice), *mushizushi* (steamed sushi), etc. - I think it would be fair to say that *hakozushi* is the epitome of Osaka sushi. We simmer *shiitake* mushrooms to make a stock to use as the base, and the preparation time is quite long, so there are fewer and fewer shops that can still make *hakozushi*. But precisely because of that, it has become something of a precious commodity.

Osaka sushi is meant to be chewed slowly and savored, and we don't use soy sauce on it. That's one of the biggest differences with the Edo-style sushi of eastern Japan [which is more familiar to people outside Japan]. You might call the Osaka style "rich" or "mellow".

The common expression *sushizume* ("packed in like sushi") for a crowded train or place comes from the way that a three-person serving of *hakozushi* is fitted tightly into the boxes we sell it in.



Hideo Hashimoto and his younger son, Takuji, who is now the Managing Director of Yoshino Sushi.

My vow as sixth-generation head of the business has been to make our employees happy

When I took over as the sixth-generation head of the family business, I decided I wanted to do what I could to make our employees happy. If the people who are working for you aren't happy, then what's the point of running a business? Our shop manager is 74 years old and the guardian of our traditional flavor. My eldest son is a CPA with his own practice, but he helps with our financial management, while my younger son will be taking over the business.

There's a *haiku* by a disciple of Basho that goes, "Springtime in Edo / Not a day passes without / A temple bell sold." The gist of it is that at the time, people had the latitude to spend their money on expensive or unusual things.

It's fine to talk about the passing on of traditions, but unless you have the people around you to pass them on to, a traditional food culture cannot be nurtured.

It seems to me that times have gotten tough recently.

As far as Osaka cuisine is concerned, people seem to think immediately of *okonomiyaki* and *takoyaki* (two inexpensive dishes involving various ingredients grilled in batter), but I would strongly appeal for *hakozushi* as the representative Osaka dish. In fact, during the term of the previous governor, I even went and demonstrated at the prefectural office...

Thanks to our efforts to preserve this traditional delicacy, I got to know Mr. Takashi Yamamoto, the former president of the Royal Hotel chain, and he began serving our sushi at hotel parties as "a piece of Osaka food culture". A Korean magazine has also published an article about us, and Korean visitors come from time to time with a copy of the magazine in hand, curious to sample *hakozushi*.

In the "One Hundred Local Dishes" campaign sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, *hakozushi* was cho-



sen to represent Osaka, along with *shiomiso zoni* (white miso soup with mochi). When this was published, we got a lot of inquiries from people who had never heard of *hako-zushi* before. Now, for both the midsummer and year-end gift-giving seasons, we are selling a lot of our six-piece frozen *mushizushi* sets. Advances in technology are allowing our products to be enjoyed by people living quite far from Osaka.

There are always issues, of course. It's becoming more difficult to procure high-quality sushi ingredients. For example, fewer and fewer sea eel are being caught in the Inland Sea these days. Since such ingredients are the very life of *hako-zushi*, we have to think about how to respond to such problems.

Sometimes I wonder, "Is it really worth insisting so much on preserving the traditional flavor?" But when customers tell me how delicious our sushi is, it confirms my feeling that we need to keep trying to deliver this flavor that has kept us going for nearly 170 years, and carry it on into the future.

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